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Background of The South Carolina Food Policy Council

Beginning in March 2005, volunteers formed a steering committee to begin the discussion and exploration of creating a statewide food policy council. The council would serve as a forum for sharing ideas and programs and to provide an opportunity to propose solutions and initiatives to state leaders. Ultimately, the goal of the council would be to work toward the improvement and expansion of healthier and more informed food choices by South Carolinians.

Based on the information gathered by the steering committee, the general consensus of the meetings determined there was a need to form a South Carolina Food Policy Council. Therefore, the steering committee drafted bylaws and invited citizens and agency representatives to serve on a voluntary Board of Directors.

On March 17, 2006, the S.C. Food Policy Council (FPC) held its first general membership meeting and continued to meet throughout the year. General members of the Council include representatives from state government agencies, university faculty members, agricultural commodity associations, food banks, farmers, elected officials, and agribusiness representatives.

After initial introductions and sharing of ideas, the group broke out into various subcommittees so that members could participate in and share information regarding topics in which members have experience or interest in.

As part of the FPC's responsibilities under its bylaws, this annual report has been prepared by the Board of Directors. The report represents the discussion, ideas and issues of concern that members of the Council shared during the meetings throughout the year. The report is intended to provide insight regarding areas within the South Carolina food production system that can be improved upon or initiated to make life taste better and healthier for all South Carolinians.

Recommendations for a Farm to School Program in South Carolina

Farm to School Background – A South Carolina Farm to School Program would increase school-aged children's access to locally grown and minimally processed South Carolina commodities in their school service food programs and snack programs. Farm to School is favorable not only for its positive health benefits for students but also the state's farmers, and local economy.

Legislation was introduced in the 2008 Legislative Session, but was not successful in passing through the General Assembly. Nevertheless, the Food Policy Council supports future attempts to pass legislation that would allow for a Statewide Farm to School Coordinator to be operated out of the South Carolina Department of Agriculture. In an effort to support the establishment of a South Carolina Farm to School Program, the South Carolina Food Policy Council shares several recommendations that could be beneficial throughout the implementation of this project.

I. Suggestions Pertaining to South Carolina Farmers: Development of South Carolina Farm to School Program Recruitment Tools.

A. Develop an awareness campaign. The more farmers know about this program, the more likely they are to participate in it. In developing a campaign which details the benefits to farmers of program involvement, they will be able to make an informed decision about contributing. Enlisting the help of marketing specialists to establish the use of promotional tools through a variety of outlets would provide the foundation necessary to proceed with farmer recruitment. If farmers are not sufficiently informed about the specifics of the program, then they will be uncertain and skeptical about becoming involved.

B. Develop an educational program for farmers. In order to further encourage farmers to not only participate in the program but to also expand their growing potential, it will be beneficial to have instructional workshops. Workshops that encourage them to grow outside of their normal crops as well as their normal growing season will make them more likely to participate in the program because they will not be going into it blind. An additional workshop that explains the process by which farmers can participate in this program will ease the burden of entering into the program.

C. Create a stepwise list of program requirements. In order for farmers to become eligible to distribute their products to the schools, they will first have to become members of the program. A detailed list of the requirements, along with the necessary steps to becoming a certified program producer, would need to be established. Approaching this project in such a fashion would give farmers the opportunity to potentially alter their practices to meet the Farm to School production specifications. This would become a pool of qualified farmers for school districts to seek out for their school food service programs.

II. Establishment of South Carolina Farm to School Program Construction Specifics.

A. Establish included commodity specifications. In order for this program to be successful, it will be necessary to compile a list of acceptable produce for use in schools.

Restrictions will need to be put in place with regard to consumer costs, food safety, etc. Once a specific list has been assembled, local farmers will be better able to determine whether or not participation in the program is a feasible option. Additionally, this would provide schools with an array of available produce choices to incorporate into breakfast and lunch menus. This recommendation and the previously mentioned program requirements would complementarily address the required farmer and commodity profiles.

B. Encourage farmers to grow during the off season: Growing Supply. By identifying schools as a ready market and potentially including additional incentives, the state's farmers will be more willing to grow during the off season. By doing this, we are ensuring that there is a continuous influx of South Carolina grown produce into the schools. Continuity within the program will be essential so has to minimize an excess of unnecessary outside providers.

C. Increase the availability of inspectors and/or funding. This will be necessary in order to provide farmers with food safety inspections and third party audits which are requirements before farmers can seek liability insurance. Providing producers with easy access to such inspectors will reduce the burden on the individual farmer as participation in the program progresses.

D. Develop a local distribution system. Attempts to maintain dedication to the principles upon which this program was developed necessitates the need for a local distribution system. With such great emphasis being placed upon stimulating the state economy and managing the scope of this project on a local level, it is only fitting that the transportation facet of this process be local as well. Distribution is an obstacle that this program must overcome as it has the potential to limit farmers' participation. Consulting with transportation resources and developing a uniform network of distribution on a local scale will be a critical component of this program.

III. Suggestions Pertaining to South Carolina Schools and Their Affiliates: Development of Program Adoption in South Carolina Schools.

A. Promote South Carolina produce. Several programs in other states have already been proposed and implemented which relate to promoting the purchase of locally grown commodities. By ensuring that citizens are made aware of the benefits of the purchase and consumption of locally grown produce, the Farm to School Program will be more readily accepted by the community. With respect to this program, it is particularly important that SC produce be promoted to school board members as they will be in a position to convince their schools to increase their purchase and consumption of local, fresh produce. One method through which this can be achieved is by having the South Carolina Department of Agriculture sponsor a session at school board meetings during which Farm to School would be discussed.

B. Develop an instructional video for school district food service purchasing representatives. By providing the districts with a video that details the process through which they will purchase from local farmers, they will more readily make the

transition from their current suppliers. Just as with the previously mentioned concept of the necessity of awareness, developing a video that can be distributed across the state is a logical method for maximizing program exposure.

Closing Remarks for Commissioner Weathers

The council has served as a forum for its members to share their concerns as well as to share their progress on related programs and initiatives that are related to the food system here in South Carolina. The networking opportunities and the information shared at these meetings have greatly benefited many of the members of the Council and they hope that the ideas and thoughts contained in this report will also serve you in your role as Commissioner of Agriculture working toward the continued growth, promotion and protection of our agricultural industry and food supply in South Carolina.